Adyashanti and Westernized Zen

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The first time I went to see the Zen teacher Adyashanti, I brought a cushion to sit on during zazen practice. After all, in a two-day "intensive" by a Zen teacher one would expect to do a good amount of sitting in meditation. But upon entering the site of the event, instead of a meditation hall I found a small chapel with rows of chairs facing a raised platform with two chairs, a microphone and a bottle of water. Some of the people who had arrived before me were sitting in chairs with their eyes closed, apparently meditating, but others were talking quietly or simply sitting and waiting. Caught off guard, I asked myself: "What is this?"

That question has wider implications concerning the "Westernization" of Buddhism. Adyashanti is an American spiritual teacher from the Zen Buddhist tradition whose popularity has been growing phenomenally over the last nine years. This essay will describe his teaching style as one that is typical of Buddhism as adapted to the U.S. and other Western cultures, then attempt to answer the question of whether his teaching can still be accurately described as Zen Buddhist. In my analysis I will draw from the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch as well as the Dharma talks and dialogues of the 17th century Zen Master Bankei.

1. Adyashanti and his teaching

Adyashanti

Adyashanti is a (non-Asian) American whose given name was Steve Gray. Now in his early forties, he began practicing meditation at age nineteen and studied with Arvis Joen Justi, a student of Taizan Maezumi Roshi of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, and also with Jakusho Kwong Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center. At age twenty-five he had an intense awakening experience, and about six years later a further more complete awakening. In 1996 Justi asked him to begin teaching on his own. He had already begun to develop his untraditional teaching

style, and started calling his public sessions "satsangs" when he learned of teachers with a similar style from the Advaita Vedanta (Hindu) tradition. The name change to Adyashanti (Sanskrit for "primordial peace") came soon afterwards.[1]

Adyashanti's popularity as a spiritual teacher has grown exponentially since then, his satsangs typically attracting nearly two hundred people. With a main base of operations in Palo Alto, he has a teaching circuit throughout the greater San Francisco Bay Area, and also appears regularly in Southern California, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah, Hawaii and British Columbia.[2] His email newsletter reaches beyond North America to people in Europe, Australia, South America, and even Asia.[3]

Teaching style

Adyashanti is a lay teacher, not a monk. (He is married.) He does not wear robes or any other special attire while giving satsangs. Satsangs last about two hours; they start with a short period of silence (approximately ten minutes), then Adyashanti gives a Dharma talk lasting about an hour. He never uses notes, and although his talks are thematically very alike, focusing on awakening and "embodying" that awakeness, each talk is different and seems to be given off the cuff. His language is very down to earth and personal, referring to his own experience very frequently; the feeling tone is intimate and often humorous. He only occasionally refers to Buddhist teachings specifically, and uses stories and sayings from other religious sources such as Vedanta and the Christian scriptures and mystics. After the Dharma talk people raise their hands if they want to speak with him, and he selects one at a time from among them to join him up front. The selectees bring up questions, problems or whatever is on their minds, and Adyashanti responds by engaging them in a dialogue that one observer has described as very similar to private *dokusan*.[4] Adyashanti's "intensives" are composed of several satsangs with the same

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[1] Adyashanti, interview by anonymous, 7 March 1999, *When I Awoke: Tales of Awakening in Various Nondual Traditions*, http://www.wheniawoke.com/Sages/Adyashanti.pdf, Internet, accessed 1 Dec. 2004; Stephan Bodian, "The Taboo of Enlightenment: Do We Really Believe We Can Awaken?" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 44-45.

[2] Open Gate Sangha, *Zen Satsang with Adyashanti*, http://www.zen-satsang.org, Internet, accessed 2 Dec. 2004.

[3] Open Gate Sangha Office, "Adyashanti Retreat Registration Deadline & Other News," email newsletter (2 Nov. 2004).

[4] Bodian, "Taboo of Enlightenment," 44.

group of attendees over a one or two day period.[5]

Adyashanti also gives longer retreats that are similar to other Zen retreats given in North America. Aside from two satsangs each day, silence is kept and there are six forty-minute meditation sessions daily. Meditation instruction is not given, just a basic instruction handout at check-in; people sit for meditation facing the wall Sōtō-Zen style. Walking meditation and private *dokusan* used to be included, but these have been dropped because the retreats have simply become too large with forty to sixty attendees at a time. Adyashanti does select people for private meetings from time to time during the retreat as he deems necessary.[6]

Teaching content

It is difficult to summarize Adyashanti's teachings, as he does not rely on simple repeatable formulas such as a list of main principles for students to focus on. He does not do commentary on the sutras and rarely refers to Buddhist teachings in a specific way. There are, however, two main themes that wind through all of his talks. He seems to find endlessly new ways to talk about these two basic themes.

The first theme is that of awakening, his preferred term for enlightenment. He usually talks about attachment to thoughts in general and the sense of separate selfhood specifically as the main obstacles to awakening.

> Awakening doesn't mean *you* awaken. It means that there is only awakening. There is no "you" who is awake, there is only awakeness. As long as you identify with a "you" who is either awake or not awake, you are still dreaming. Awakening is awakening from the dream of a separate you into simply being Awakeness.[7]

> The problem is that most people are paying attention to objects, to what they perceive—rather than to the ultimate perceiver, the background. Either way,

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[5] The description of satsangs is based on my own observations.

[6] Larry Melton, interview by author, telephone interview, Davis, CA, 11 Nov. 2004. Larry Melton is a student of Adyashanti who was asked by him to begin teaching in late 2004.

[7] Adyashanti, *The Impact of Awakening: Excerpts from the Teachings of Adyashanti*, 2nd ed. (Los Gatos, CA: Open Gate Sangha, 2002), 57.

> awareness is happening 100% of the time. The light is on brightly. It never goes off, but where is it looking? The human condition is characterized by a complete fascination with objects, starting with this object that we interpret as "me." Me is only a thought. You are before this me thought.[8]

The second theme is that of embodying awakeness. It is not sufficient to have an experience of awakening; one must live from moment to moment in that state of being without getting lost in the contents of the mind again.

> This process of embodiment is a continual stripping away of every remnant of attachment and ego. It is a movement of continual surrender to the vast implications contained within true spiritual Awakening.[9]

> Embodiment is usually a gradual process that begins after the event called "awakening," so we can't really speak about embodiment in absolute terms. The indications of embodiment are peace, love, wisdom, and enlightened action. What effect we have on others is a good indication of exactly how enlightened we are. If we think we are very enlightened, but have a negative effect on others, we are probably not nearly as enlightened as we'd like to believe.[10]

His dialogues with satsang attendees are an important part of his teaching, applying the themes of awakeness and embodiment to the particular issues people bring before him:

> **Q:** I've been experiencing being really open, followed by being contracted when there's egoic wanting. It seems that I don't really want to give up the egoic wanting.
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> **A:** Is that true?
>
> **Q:** No.
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> **A:** So what do you get out of telling yourself that story?

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[8] *Impact of Awakening*, 49.

[9] *Impact of Awakening*, 63.

[10] *Impact of Awakening*, 64.

Q: I get to focus on me.

A: Do you like to focus on me?

Q: No. Not really. It's not satisfying. It's experiencing confusion, separateness, wanting.

A: So what is satisfying, truly satisfying?

Q: To tell the truth.

A: And what is the truth? . . . What is the truth that you truly want, yearn for, desire to tell yourself?

Q: I'm not sure. Or maybe I just don't know, or am overlooking it.

A: Find that out.[11]

> The main reason I focus on public dialogue is that most of the people who come to see me have been meditating for years, but what they're missing is the ruthless ability and willingness to question—their own personal psychology, their spiritual beliefs, the teachings of their tradition, even the assumptions of their meditation practice. Watching a teacher work with his students in a direct and intimate way to investigate and question deeply their stories and beliefs, opens up a world of possibilities for them. Any beliefs or stories we take to be true, even age-old spiritual beliefs, just obscure the truth of who we really are.[12]

2. Westernized Buddhism

Much has been written about the new forms of Buddhism developing in the West, particularly as found outside of Asian immigrant communities. Adyashanti's teaching activities are a good example of common trends.[13] He and his followers are almost all ethnically "white"

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[11] *Impact of Awakening*, 40-41.

[12] Adyashanti, interview by Bodian, "Taboo of Enlightenment, " 108.

[13] Rick Fields has identified six such trends in what he calls "White Buddhism": (1) it is largely a laypersons' movement, (2) meditation is the key practice, (3) Western psychology is seen as useful, (4) it is feminist, (5) it is socially engaged, and (6) it is anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical. Adyashanti's activities fit numbers 1, 2 and 4, but not 3, 5 and (possibly) 6. Rick Fields, "Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism" in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 202. See also James William Coleman, "The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings," in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Duncan Ryūken

laypersons.[14] Meditation is the only Buddhist practice clearly in evidence; other practices such as chanting and sutra study are apparently not utilized. Adyashanti treats men and women students the same, and in fact seven of the thirteen students he had asked to teach by the end of 2004 are women.[15] He is also typically Western in his eclecticism and distancing himself from any single specific religious tradition.[16] Although he uses the word "Zen" in promotional material such as his website, he downplays affiliation with Zen as a Buddhist tradition:

> my intense investigation of truth had purged me of all fascination with tradition, with Buddhism, with Asian culture. When I looked around at the Buddhist tradition, I realized that the success rate was terrible. People were in it for enlightenment, but very few were actually getting enlightened. If this were a business, I thought, we'd be bankrupt.
>
> I didn't reject anything. I just stopped blindly adhering to the traditional approach, and the energy bound up in following transferred to looking deeply into what's really true.[17]

> A point came where I felt to continue in integrity, I couldn't pretend like I was passing on a tradition that I wasn't and that I increasingly had less and less interest in passing on a tradition or a teaching and more and more interest in the dynamic, ever moving, ever-evolving process of teaching presenting itself in a new and fresh way...[18]

As Adyashanti himself no longer calls his teaching Buddhism, this highlights the question that many authors have asked: are Westernized developments such as this authentic

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Williams and Christopher S. Queen, Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1999).

[14] Based on my observations at satsangs in Oakland, Santa Barbara, San Rafael and Tustin, California.

[15] Open Gate Sangha, *Zen Satsang with Adyashanti*.

[16] Kenneth Tanaka has discussed the "diffuse" affiliations and eclectic and nonsectarian tendencies of American Buddhists. Kenneth K. Tanaka, "Epilogue: The Colors and Contours of American Buddhism" in Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism in America*, 296-297.

[17] Adyashanti, "Taboo of Enlightenment," 45.

[18] Adyashanti, *When I Awoke*, 39.

Buddhism?[19] The problem in trying to answer this of course is in defining "authentic Buddhism." One approach to this question would be to highlight common elements associated with the teachings of historical figures widely recognized as authentic exemplars of the tradition. In a short essay like this it is impossible to do a thorough treatment of even one such figure, but I will briefly consider three in the Zen Buddhist tradition in order to look for common elements relevant to assessing whether Adyashanti's spiritual teaching can still be accurately described as Zen Buddhist.

3. Exemplars of Zen Buddhism

The Buddha

The chief exemplar of any form of Buddhism would obviously be the Buddha himself, Siddhārtha Gautama (fifth century B.C.E.).[20] At least three elements of his teaching should be considered: his example as a teacher, his teaching, and the way of life he founded.

As a teacher the Buddha was an innovator, drawing on his own experience rather than adhering rigidly to any previous tradition, and he made a point of preaching in common, down-to-earth language, not only teaching but engaging in question and answer dialogues.[21] These traits also characterize Adyashanti as a teacher.

The content of the teaching of the Buddha as presented in the *sutras* is extensive, but it is widely agreed that at the core of it are the Four Noble Truths (the truths of suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and that there is a path that ends suffering), and the Eightfold Path (right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration).[22] Although he rarely mentions them specifically, Adyashanti's teaching does correspond with the Four Noble Truths. He teaches that

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[19] See, for example, in addition to Fields, "Divided Dharma" and Tanaka, "Epilogue" (above), C. Victor Sōgen Hori, "Japanese Zen in America: Americanizing the Face in the Mirror," and Gil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," all in Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism in America*.

[20] The exact dates of the Buddha's birth and death are contested; Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11.

[21] *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 33-34; Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23-24, 29.

[22] *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 45-60; *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 48-58.

we suffer because we desire and thus attach to objects, including the self as an illusory "object," and that there is a way to end this suffering by ending attachments. He does not much discuss the aspects of the Eightfold Path having to do with morality (speech, action and livelihood), but does touch on the others, focusing especially on right understanding and mindfulness of our situation. Based on this assessment, I would judge his teaching to be predominantly Buddhist in content, although weighted toward certain aspects and neglecting others. Although at times he uses language that is closer to traditions such as Vedanta and Christianity, for example using the terms "God," "the Divine," and "Grace," he uses such terms virtually synonymously with non-theistic terms such as "consciousness" and "Emptiness."[23]

The way of life that the Buddha founded was a monastic way with detailed rules. Lay followers supported the monks, and female monks were subordinate to male monks.[24] As mentioned earlier, Adyashanti is not a monastic but a lay teacher who treats men and women equally.

The Sixth Patriarch

Tradition holds that the teaching lineage of the Ch'an school of Buddhism ran from the Buddha to the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who migrated to China about 470 C.E. and became the First Patriarch of Ch'an. "Ch'an" is the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit word for meditation; this school emphasized meditation and "direct pointing into the mind" over study of the sutras and philosophical discussion.[25] As Zen Buddhism descended from Ch'an, Hui-neng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an and one of its most revered figures, will be our second exemplar.

In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, Hui-neng is depicted as a poor illiterate who came to enlightenment and then spent thirty-seven years teaching from direct experience. Like the Buddha he taught to all classes of people using common language, and engaged in dialogues meant to bring his interlocutors to enlightenment. One of the major themes of the *sutra* is that knowledge of the scriptures without wisdom (*prajna*) is another source of delusion. Inherent Buddha-nature is the true source of wisdom, but it is obscured in most people because of

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[23] Adyashanti, *Impact of Awakening*, 71, 73, 79, 86, 96.

[24] Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 21-28, 64-67.

[25] *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 200-201.

attachment to thoughts and other mental phenomena. By detaching yourself from these mental phenomena—not suppressing them as some taught—Buddha-nature reveals itself. Meditation is useless without such detachment, but with detachment all action is meditation.[26] Like Adyashanti, the Sixth Patriarch does not refer specifically to the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path, but his teaching is broadly consistent with them; also like Adyashanti, he speaks less about the elements of the Eightfold Path having to do with morality, and more about those having to do with wisdom and concentration.

> Good friends, people of the world originally have the knowledge of bodhi and prajna within them, but they cannot realize it themselves because of the wandering of the conditioned mind; that is why they need a teacher to point it out and guide them to perception of essential nature...
>
> What is freedom from thought? If you see all things without the mind being affected or attached, this is freedom from thought. Its function pervades everywhere, without being attached anywhere... If you do not think at all, you will cause thought to be stopped entirely. This is dogmatic bondage, this is called a biased view.
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> Good friends, those who realize the state of freedom from thought penetrate all things. Those who realize the state of freedom from thought see the realms of the buddhas. Those who realize the state of freedom from thought arrive at the rank of buddhahood.[27]

> Good friends, the Way should be fluid, free-flowing. Why then do you stagnate? When the mind does not dwell on things, then the Way is fluid. If the mind dwells on things, that is called self-binding. If you say constant sitting is right, you are contradicted by the fact that Shariputra was scolded by Vimalakirti for sitting quietly in the forest.[28]

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[26] Hui-neng, *The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1998).

[27] *Sutra of Hui-neng*, 16, 21-22.

[28] *Sutra of Hui-neng*, 32.

> The nature of worldly people is always drifting, like the clouds in the sky. Good friends, wisdom is like the sun, insight is like the moon; knowledge and insight are always light, but when you fixate on objects outside, you get your own essential nature covered by the drifting clouds of errant thoughts, so you cannot have light and clarity. If you meet a spiritual benefactor and hear truly authentic teaching, you get rid of confusion so that inside and out are thoroughly clear, and myriad things appear within your own essential nature. This is how it is with people who see essential nature. This is called the buddha as the pure body of reality.[29]

As noted above, Adyashanti's teaching also focuses on detachment from mental phenomena as the condition of enlightenment; furthermore, he discusses meditation in a way similar to the teaching of the Sixth Patriarch:

> In true meditation, all objects are left to their natural functioning. This means that no effort should be made to manipulate or suppress any object of awareness. In true meditation, the emphasis is on being awareness; not on being aware of objects, but on resting as primordial awareness itself. Primordial awareness, consciousness, is the source in which all objects arise and subside. As you gently relax into awareness, into listening, the mind's compulsive contraction around objects will fade. Silence of being will come more clearly into your consciousness, welcoming you to rest and abide. An attitude of open receptivity, free of any goal or anticipation, will facilitate the presence of silence and stillness, and reveal them to be your natural condition.[30]

The sutra does not say much about the way of life of Hui-neng and his students, although clearly he is a monk living in monasteries and teaching other monks. But he also taught many laypeople, and in fact expected that laypeople would be teachers of Ch'an:

> Seventy years after I leave, two bodhisattvas will come from the East. One will

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[29] *Sutra of Hui-neng*, 41.

[30] Adyashanti, *Impact of Awakening*, 25-26.

> be a renunciant, the other a householder. Actively teaching in the same age, they will establish my school, organizing sanctuaries and enabling spiritual heirs to flourish.[31]

Zen Master Bankei

Eisai was a Japanese Buddhist monk of the late twelfth century who encountered Ch'an in China and is generally credited with founding the first Zen temple in Japan (Zen is the Japanese word for Ch'an). Later teachers also contributed to the development of Zen, among them the influential Zen Master Bankei Yōtaku (1622-1693).[32] Like the Buddha and the Sixth Patriarch, Bankei taught all classes of people using everyday language, often engaging in give-and-take dialogues. Rather than quoting the sutras and the patriarchs, he directed people to become aware of the "Unborn Buddha Mind" present in us all.[33]

> The people studying Zen nowadays spend all their time on old Zen words and stories, quoting this fellow and citing that one as they deliberate fruitlessly over their koans. Trailing doggedly after other peoples' words. Feeding on their dregs. Caught in another man's tub, unable to break out into real freedom... If you chase along after phrases and get muddled up in words, you're no better off than a man who loses his sword over the side of a ship and then marks the spot where it fell in on the railing.[34]

> The only way any of you can become unborn and realize the Buddha-mind is to confirm what I'm telling you in your own mind. I won't tell you that you have to practice such and such, that you have to uphold certain rules or precepts or read certain sutras or other Zen writings, or that you have to do zazen. I'm not going to try to give you the Buddha-mind either—you already have it. If you listen carefully to me, and grasp the Buddha-mind that's already yours, then you

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[31] Hui-neng, *Sutra of Hui-neng*, 76.

[32] Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 262-264, 277-278.

[33] Bankei, *The Unborn: The Life and Teaching of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, trans. Norman Waddell (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).

[34] *The Unborn*, 133-134.

become a genuine living Buddha.[35]

The reason people do not realize their Unborn Buddha-mind is that they acquire mental habits in growing up, which continue to be triggered by partiality to the self:

> Just stop and look back to the origin of this self of yours. When you were born, your parents didn't give you any happy, evil, or bitter thoughts. There was only your Buddha-mind. Afterwards, when your intelligence appeared, you saw and heard other people saying and doing bad things, and you learned them and made them yours. By the time you reached adulthood, deep-set habits, formed in this way of your own manufacture, emerged. Now, cherishing yourself and you own ideas, you turn your Buddha-mind into the path of fighting spirits. If you covet what belongs to other people, kindling selfish desires for something that can never be yours, you create the path of hungry ghosts, and you change the Buddha-mind into that kind of existence. This is what is known as transmigration.[36]

> You create your outbursts of temper when the organs of your six senses...are stimulated by some external condition and incite you to oppose other people because you desire to assert your own preciously held ideas. When you have no attachment to self, there are no illusions. Have that perfectly clear.
>
> All your parents gave you when you were born was a Buddha-mind. Nothing else. What have you done with it? From the time you were a tiny baby you've watched and listened to people losing their tempers around you. You've been schooled in this, until you too have become habituated to irascibility...
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> Once you've realized this and you stop creating that temper of yours, you'll find that you won't have any other illusions either, not even if you want to, for you'll be living constantly in the unborn Buddha-mind. There is nothing else.[37]

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[35] *The Unborn*, 107.

[36] *The Unborn*, 79.

[37] *The Unborn*, 62.

Like the Sixth Patriarch, Bankei recommends detachment from thoughts, not suppression of them:

> A layman: Every time I clear a thought from my mind, another appears right away. Thoughts keep appearing like that without end. What can I do about them?
>
> Bankei: Clearing thoughts from the mind as they arise is like washing away blood in blood. You may succeed in washing away the original blood, but you're still polluted by the blood you washed in. No matter how long you keep washing, the bloodstains never disappear. Since you don't know that your mind is originally unborn and undying and free of illusion, you think that your thoughts really exist, so you transmigrate in the wheel of existence. You have to realize that your thoughts are ephemeral and unreal and, without either clutching at them or rejecting them, just let them come and go of themselves.[38]

Bankei mentions morality more frequently than the Sixth Patriarch, and often refers to Buddhist teachings such as reincarnation (transmigration), but his major theme is the Unborn Buddha Mind which we all have and which is realized by detachment from thoughts, mental habits and "partiality" to the self. He does not refer specifically to the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path, but again there is a clear correspondence between his central theme and these traditional Buddhist teachings. And again there are echoes of this Zen exemplar in the teaching of Adyashanti:

> You have to become more interested in the silent background than in the foreground, the phenomena: thoughts, emotions, sounds, smells, etc. Most people are focused on the foreground and what their five senses bring them, but the Self is discovered in the background. The Self is the source from which the phenomena spring and the ground in which this display of phenomena is happening, from the subtlest feelings and experiences to the grossest matter. When you rest in this background, you can taste your Self. You just give yourself

[38] *The Unborn*, 117.

to it.[39]

Q: How does one eliminate feelings, thought, grief, fear, or cravings, and addictions while meditating? Are positive affirmations useful for this?
A. Stop trying to eliminate anything. It is the belief that a thing needs to be eliminated that maintains its existence. Be an open space for whatever arises. When everything is allowed to arise, you have the opportunity to perceive That which does not arise or subside. You are That.[40]

Bankei was a monk and trained other monks in monasteries, but like the Sixth Patriarch he also taught lay people and expected that they could realize the Unborn Buddha Mind without becoming monks.

4. Conclusion

My analysis of these three exemplars of Zen Buddhism shows that they have several elements in common that are also present in Adyashanti's teaching. They all share a similar style of teaching, relying more on direct experience than on tradition, using everyday language accessible to ordinary people, and engaging inquirers in dialogue. The main themes of their teachings all center on how detachment from thoughts and other mental states, including the sense of a separate self, end our suffering and allow us to awaken to something larger. All regard right understanding and mindfulness as essential to this detachment, although they vary in how much they refer to other elements of the Eightfold Path. Based on this initial analysis I would argue that, in terms of style and content, Adyashanti's teaching can be accurately described as Zen Buddhist, although he himself does not make an issue of this.[41]

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[39] Adyashanti, *Impact of Awakening*, 16.

[40] *Impact of Awakening*, 32.

[41] Interestingly, the Sixth Patriarch and Bankei also show signs of ambivalence on this topic. "One monk asked the Master, 'Who gets the message of Huang-mei?' The Master said, 'Someone who understands Buddhism.' The Monk said, 'Do you get it?' The Master said, 'I don't understand Buddhism.'" (Hui-neng, *Sutra of Hui-neng*, 58) "I never cite the Buddha's words or the words of Zen patriarchs when I teach. All I do is comment directly on people themselves. That takes care of everything. I don't have to quote other people. So you won't find me saying anything about either the 'Buddha Dharma' or the 'Zen Dharma.' I don't have to, when I can clear everything up for you by commenting directly on you and your personal concerns right here and now. I've no reason to preach about 'Buddhism' or 'Zen.'" (Bankei, *The Unborn*, 37)

The main difference that I have found between the three exemplars and Adyashanti is that they were monks devoting most of their time to training other monks (although they did also teach laypeople), while Adyashanti is neither a monk nor does he train monks. I am not sure how important this difference is. On the one hand, because all three exemplars maintained a monastic way of life, it would seem to be an essential element of the teaching they handed down. On the other hand, perhaps social conditions in the modern world have changed so dramatically that it is now more feasible for laypeople to find the time to apply themselves to study and practice, as by undertaking periodic retreats such as those offered by Adyashanti. This is a question that deserves more extensive consideration than I can give to it here.[42]

As for the larger question of Westernized Buddhism, the implication of this study is that it is possible to identify common elements in the teaching of recognized historical exemplars of Buddhism that can help evaluate whether modern forms of Buddhism are authentic or not (or at least, to what degree they are authentic). In doing my analysis I have found that the major themes in the content of the teaching of the Sixth Patriarch and Zen Master Bankei were easier to identify than I expected; some themes simply stood out by constant repetition. Adyashanti's key themes also stood out fairly clearly in reading his book and listening to him teach in his satsangs.

In conclusion, in at least this one case of a Westernized form of Buddhism, an argument can be made that it is authentic Zen Buddhism. I do not regard this argument as definitive, but it should be encouraging for those who hope to see authentic Buddhism successfully transplanted to the West.

Postscript, May 2007

Since I have begun to do some spiritual teaching myself, people have asked me about my relationship with Adyashanti, whom I regard as one of my teachers. This postscript is a partial answer to that question.

I had been practicing meditation and engaged in spirituality for nearly thirty years when in October of 2002 a friend lent me a couple of cassette tapes of talks by Adyashanti. Although I felt I had made real progress in my spiritual life up to that point, I knew something was still eluding me and having reached age fifty that year I was in a state of intense frustration about this

[42] I incline to the latter view.

feeling of incompletion. While listening to one of those tapes I suddenly experienced a shift in consciousness, which I would describe as a release from identification with my “self.” My life has not been the same since then. I went to see Adya speak several times after that, and once spoke with him at one of his satsangs about what I was going through. His response, although I am sure it sounded enigmatic to others listening, was very helpful to me. Subsequently I did a lot of reading and rethinking of my ideas about Christianity, which I still regard as my home tradition, as well as of my understanding of Buddhism, as it felt like my mind needed to “catch up”, in a sense, with what was happening to me. The above essay was one of a set of essays I wrote during that period of time.

In early 2005 I was invited to speak at a sangha in San Francisco, and the response was so positive that I seriously considered going on to do spiritual teaching myself. However, not too much developed further in that direction, and I wrestled with the question of whether I should more actively pursue it. I contacted Adya’s organization and he kindly agreed to a private conversation with me, which took place on April 27, 2006 at his new headquarters in San Jose, California. We spent about an hour together and talked on a number of subjects, but on the central question of my doing spiritual teaching he essentially left that decision up to me. On the one hand, he told me he did not train people to be spiritual teachers, he would simply have an internal sense that he should ask somebody to begin teaching—and that he did not have that sense in my case. On the other hand, sometimes people would ask him about undertaking spiritual teaching and he would tell them definitely that it was not a good idea—but he did not have that sense with me either. He gave me some further advice, but neither gave nor withheld approval of my doing spiritual teaching.

After moving to Eugene, Oregon, later that year I began giving talks in my home and posting them online to my website. I do not know if I will continue in this direction, but this is where things stand at this point. I am very grateful to Adyashanti for the ways in which he has helped me, and if I can give help to others in a similar way, I am thankful for that as well.

—Alan F. Zundel, May 2007

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